



INSTITUTE FOR  
REFORMING GOVERNMENT

# WISCONSIN SPEAKS

EVERYDAY PEOPLE, FROM DIFFERENT CORNERS OF THE STATE, BACKGROUNDS, AND WALKS OF LIFE, TALKED TO US ABOUT THEIR CHALLENGES, CONCERNS, AND IDEAS FOR THE BADGER STATE IN 2026 - AND BEYOND.







INSTITUTE FOR  
REFORMING GOVERNMENT

## ABOUT IRG

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The Institute for Reforming Government is committed to “building bridges” — connecting people to policy, amplifying voices, and solving everyday problems across Wisconsin. Founded in 2018, IRG seeks to eliminate onerous red tape and simplify government at every level, offering policy solutions to advance tax reform, reduce regulatory burdens, and restore efficiency to state and local institutions. Over a short period, it has grown into one of the state’s largest think tanks, staffed by a seasoned policy team with decades of experience in government, trade associations, and statewide campaigns. Most importantly, IRG works to deliver real-world results — putting people first and making Wisconsin the heart of the American Dream.

## ABOUT IRG COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

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We are proud to have expanded our community engagement infrastructure across nearly every region of the state. Since 2021, IRG has built deep and lasting relationships in marginalized communities on Milwaukee’s north and south sides, as well as in the Fox Valley, northeast Wisconsin, central Wisconsin, and the Northwoods. Our Community Engagement team works to build trust, elevate community voices, and help address the complex challenges facing areas most in need of transformational reforms and expanded opportunity.

**We pride ourselves in knowing what Wisconsin wants.**

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Executive Summary</b>	5
<b>Introduction</b>	6
<b>Methodology</b>	8
<b>Wisconsin Speaks on Kitchen Table Issues</b>	10
1) Cost of Living Crisis	10
Overall Inflation	13
Housing	14
Health care	16
Child care	18
State and Local Taxes	19
2) Workforce Challenges and Talent Retention Threaten	
Wisconsin's Economic Future	20
Higher Wages	20
K-12 Schools	22
Government Benefits System that Encourages Work	24
3) Stronger Families and Communities	25
Mental Health	26
Crime and Public Safety	27
Agriculture	28
<b>Issues Raised but with less Intensity</b>	29
Marijuana	29
DNR	30
Abortion	31
Infrastructure/Roads	32
<b>Conclusion: Main Takeaways</b>	33
<b>Exhibit A: Survey</b>	35
<b>Exhibit B: Polling</b>	39
<b>Exhibit C: Notes of Listening Sessions</b>	42
<b>References</b>	55

***"Anywhere you wrote affordable, you could also write available."***

- Businessman in Burlington in reference to affordable child care, affordable health care, and affordable housing

***"Child care is a top issue for the city and a number of organizations. We had a couple of big closures during and right after the pandemic."***

- Beloit participant

***"There should never be a point where earning an extra dollar costs you money."***

- Burlington participant

***"We have lots of friends that moved to Florida. They'll do six months and one day in Florida, so that they can have the tax advantages in Florida. And, you know, if Wisconsin is going to be prosperous, we need to have the retirees' income here."***

- Northern WI participant

***"There's a big divide and a lot of growing resentment in the have-nots or those that haven't been able to join the housing market."***

- SE WI participant

***"It's pretty sad to see where a \$100 bill goes. It's like, no, no, no. When I was a kid, I got a \$100 bill, that was a big deal."***

- Elkhorn participant

***"We don't have the jobs with the salaries to afford places like [the] boujee places coming up."***

- De Pere participant

***"The only people I really know that are a little bit younger than me that have got houses are like - you can either have a wedding or give you the down payment for a house, so they chose the house."***

- De Pere participant

***"How do you recruit brand-new teachers to move to Wausau if they can't afford to pay rent the next month?"***

- Wausau educator

***"I think the dumbest tax is property tax. Why should you pay taxes on something you already own? And if you're getting squeezed in buying a house, let's squeeze you some more after you already own it."***

- De Pere participant

***"There's no way I can afford a house right now."***

- 25-year-old participant from Hayward



*What do Wisconsinites talk about at the kitchen table?* To fully understand this question, the IRG outreach team—led by Courtney Gustafson—traveled more than 2,000 miles from May to September 2025, convening 14 different listening sessions in many areas of Wisconsin. In total, we listened, in-person, to more than 100 Wisconsinites - parents, retirees, workers, manufacturers, employers - from the northside of Milwaukee to De Pere to Wausau to Hayward to Beloit.

And, to be clear, we *listened*. We listened for 30 hours. We didn't push any policy agenda or use political talking points. Our job was to facilitate a conversation about what is on voters' minds and the challenges to their families and communities. To complement our listening sessions, *WI Speaks* polling was conducted with RMG Research from October 23-28 of 800 registered voters with a margin +/- 3.5%.

While we encourage you to read the full report, ***here are our four main takeaways from the project:***

**1. "It's the affordability, stupid,"** to paraphrase the 1990s political slogan. By far, the most significant point of conversation in every listening session was the cost of living - inflationary pressures on food and living expenses, housing, health care, child care. Overall, in IRG's poll of statewide voters, 39% of voters said that "cost of living" was the #1 issue that would drive their vote, which included 49% of Independents. Three of every four Wisconsin voters say that their incomes have been falling behind inflation in 2025.

**2. Health care and state taxes and housing, oh my.** Participants elaborated on certain policy issues that were keeping costs up. When they were asked about the top issues facing their family, 20% said affordable housing, 15% state and local taxes, 10% affordable health care. In our statewide poll, over 60% of voters indicated that health care, taxes, and housing were important issues for their vote.

**3. K-12 education is on people's minds but isn't driving any behavior.** The shortcomings of Wisconsin's K-12 education system came up in almost every listening session - literacy, ties to an inadequate workforce, apprenticeships. But in the IRG statewide poll only 5% of voters indicated that K-12 education was the most important issue in 2026. In the same poll, while voters had plenty of ideas to improve their schools, of the respondents that had school-aged children living at home with them (20% of the total respondents), 45% of them said that they were "very satisfied" with their children's schools.

**4. Abortion isn't a main issue in 2026 (until it is?).** Abortion rarely came up in our listening sessions as a kitchen-table issue. And when asked to write down the top issue on paper, 4% said it was the number one issue facing all Wisconsinites and 3% said it was the top issue facing them or their family. Similarly, in our statewide poll only 4% of voters said abortion would be their top issue in 2026 (including 0% of Independents). And yet, just five months prior to this project, abortion was one of the top issues<sup>1</sup> in the State Supreme Court race - with 60% of respondents citing that issue as "very important" including 65% of women and 47% of Independents.

## INTRODUCTION

Tired of losing and feeling out of touch with the people, in 2006, then-Speaker of the Florida Assembly Marco Rubio organized community leaders all throughout Florida to get their input on crafting the vision for Florida's future. He would eventually publish a book in November 2006 - titled *100 Innovative Ideas for Florida's Future* - which would be a part of the conservative comeback in Florida.

Modeled off of Rubio's community engagement project, in 2022, IRG embarked on its journey to meet with hundreds of community members in every corner of the state to learn what they care about. We met with school board members in rural Luxemburg, small business owners in Green Bay, faith leaders in urban Milwaukee, skilled workers in Brillion, and teachers and superintendents in nearly every region of the state. The rules were simple: listen and learn. IRG did not pitch any solutions; our role was to keep the conversation going. From 2022-2023, our team traveled over 5,000 miles, hosting over 40 listening sessions with over 100 Wisconsinites to learn what was on the minds of residents all across this state.

The journey was a success and we were able to produce a report, [\*What Wisconsin Wants\*](#)<sup>2</sup>, in 2023, as the culmination of what we learned from our fact-finding mission. Following the success of our initial report, we produced a second report less than a year later, focusing specifically on college-educated women in the Milwaukee suburbs - [\*What Wisconsin Wants: The Views of College-Educated Women in the Milwaukee Suburbs\*](#)<sup>3</sup> as well as a [\*What Wisconsin Wants: Going in Depth with Rural Wisconsin Voters\*](#)<sup>4</sup> in May 2024 and a [\*Civil Society Summit\*](#)<sup>5</sup> following the November 2024 election.

Following the successful release of those four reports, in 2025, we decided to embark on *Wisconsin Speaks: Listening, Learning, Leading* which entailed listening sessions, survey work, and statewide polling in order to learn about the issues and challenges of everyday Wisconsinites.

This report merges insights from our listening sessions, surveys, and statewide polling from May to October 2025. **In short, to paraphrase from the political slogan in the 1990s, "it's the affordability, stupid."** In listening sessions, from the north side of Milwaukee to Beloit to De Pere to the Northwoods, the most common concern we heard from people in 2025 is the everyday cost of living - food, housing, health care, and child care. This was reflected, to an even greater extent, in a statewide poll conducted by Scott Rasmussen and RMG Research to accompany our listening sessions. What we learned in the poll largely aligned with what we heard in person, though there were some notable differences. In-person attendees generally tended to be individuals who were motivated to voice their opinions, which tended to highlight particular issues over others. The poll provided a more representative snapshot of the broader population, including people who are less likely to attend events such as listening sessions. These variations strengthened our understanding of statewide sentiment and confirmed the value of using multiple approaches to gather input.

This report connects what we heard in our conversations to larger economic and demographic trends across Wisconsin. By pairing qualitative insights with polling data and statewide facts, we aim to show how residents' concerns—about issues like housing, education, and health care—reflect broader realities. We hope this paper helps show a window into Wisconsin's social and economic climate and helps to build a foundation for future policy ideas grounded in both lived experience and solid evidence.



*Wisconsin Speaks: Listening, Learning, Leading* is intended to serve as a resource for anyone seeking to better understand what industry leaders and everyday Wisconsinites view as the most important issues facing the state—especially the issues where broad agreement exists and meaningful common ground can be built.



**With voters going to the ballot box in November 2026 to decide who will control the legislature and governorship of Wisconsin, our report indicates that the winner will be those candidates who connect on the affordability crisis and those who present policy solutions to bring down the cost of living.**

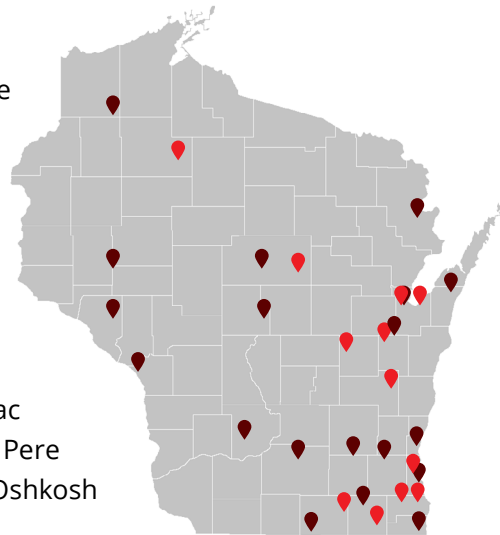
## METHODOLOGY

In 2025, the Institute for Reforming Government launched *Wisconsin Speaks: Listening, Learning, Leading* to systematically collect and document residents' policy frustrations and reform priorities through statewide listening sessions. These sessions—spanning urban, suburban, and rural communities—captured a broad cross-section of Wisconsinites, including parents, employers, educators, retirees, college graduates, and working-class residents.

Our goal was simple: identify the issues that most Wisconsinites agree on and want leaders to address so that people across the state have a fair chance to achieve their American Dream. To accomplish this, we used a mixed-methods approach. We convened 14 different listening sessions across Wisconsin—traveling more than 2,000 miles—and selected locations to reflect both geographic and workforce diversity. Each conversation focused on kitchen-table issues, and each participant completed a survey ranking their top concerns. In total, we spoke with more than 100 residents through these in-person sessions.

### WHERE WE WENT

- Greater Wausau Chamber of Commerce
- AmeriLux, De Pere
- Johnson Timber, Hayward
- Beloit Area Chamber of Commerce
- AriensCo, Brillion
- Experience Burlington
- School Choice Parents, Milwaukee
- Adams, Elkhorn
- Recipes for Freedom Group, Fond du Lac
- Northeast Wisconsin Patriot Group, De Pere
- Group of conservative-leaning voters, Oshkosh
- GOP Women of SE WI, Mount Pleasant
- Northern and Northeast WI Women (virtual session)
- Parents from Southeast WI (virtual session)



#### TOWNS / CITIES VISITED FOR WHAT WISCONSIN WANTS

- Arcadia
- Beloit
- Brillion
- Brookfield
- De Pere
- Eau Claire
- Elkhorn
- Green Bay
- Appleton
- Hayward
- Janesville
- Kenosha
- La Crosse
- Luxemburg
- Madison
- Milwaukee
- Oconomowoc
- Onalaska
- Sheboygan Falls
- South Milwaukee
- Spring Green
- Stevens Point
- Waukesha
- Wausau

Of these 100 in-person participants, we gathered a few personal details to describe more of the “who” of who they are and here is what we know:

**Gender Breakdown:** 55% male, 45% female

**Political Affiliation Breakdown:** 39% strong right, 19% lean right, 15% none, 4% lean left, 1% strong left, 7% other, 15% unknown/not identified

**Geographical Location:** Over 46 zip codes in Wisconsin represented



During the listening sessions, we asked each participant to fill out a written survey, and we also offered an online option for anyone who preferred to respond digitally or participate only via the survey. The additional insights from 100 center-right Wisconsinites—including conservative activists and business leaders—through the online survey, helped to ensure we captured perspectives from across the ideological spectrum. Altogether, more than 200 people across the state completed the survey, giving us a broad mix of perspectives from different geographical communities, age groups, and backgrounds. Their responses helped us better understand what people think are the top issues affecting their daily lives and this added valuable context to the conversations we had in person.

To broaden and help explain what we heard in-person and learned through surveys, in October 2025, *WI Speaks* polling was conducted with RMG Research from October 23-28 of 800 registered voters with a margin +/- 3.5%<sup>7</sup>.



## WISCONSIN SPEAKS ON KITCHEN TABLE ISSUES

Here are the main issues impacting Wisconsinites from our listening sessions and poll, in order of intensity and frequency:

### 1. COST OF LIVING CRISIS

Wisconsin families are being squeezed by affordability pressures.

Every listening session — from Green Bay to Burlington to Hayward — described the same cost-of-living crisis:

- Starter homes are now out of reach for young families.
- Child care is unaffordable or unavailable (waitlists of 1–2 years).
- Health care is expensive.
- Property taxes, income taxes, and Social Security taxation make retirees and working families feel financially punished.

Affordability concerns were universal, cutting across age, income, geographical location, and political affiliation. In our polling when asked, *“Which of the following issues is most important?”* the top issue by far was inflation and the cost of living at **39%**—a level of consensus unmatched by any other priority. This means nearly four in ten voters chose inflation as their single most important issue, a full **26 points higher** than the next-closest concern, health care (17%). No other issue—whether the economy, immigration, housing, education, crime, or taxes—broke into double digits in a meaningful way. The sheer margin underscores that the cost-of-living crisis is not just one issue among many, but the dominant lens through which Wisconsinites are evaluating their finances, their communities, and their political choices.

### ISSUES DRIVING THE VOTE

*“Which of the following is most important?”*

ISSUE	OVERALL	GOP	IND	DEM
Inflation / Cost of Living	39	35	49	40
Economy	13	15	17	10
Health Care	17	11	15	24
Crime	5	7	1	3
Taxes & Revenue	4	5	5	2
Housing Affordability	6	2	5	9
Education	5	4	5	7
Immigration	7	13	3	1
Abortion	4	6	0	3
Child care	1	1	0	1

RMG Research - Oct. 23–28 • 800 registered voters • Margin  $\pm$  3.5%



The chart illustrates the issues voters consider most important, broken down by overall electorate and by partisan affiliation (Republican, Independent, Democrat). When respondents were asked to choose *one* top issue from a list, **Inflation/Cost of Living** dominated across every group.

### Overall Patterns:

- **Inflation/Cost of Living (39%)** is the top issue statewide—nearly four in ten voters selected it, making it by far the most unifying concern in the electorate.
- **The Economy (13%) and Health Care (17%)** form a distant second tier of concerns.
- All other issues—crime, taxes, housing, education, immigration, abortion, and childcare—register in the single digits.

### By Political Affiliation:

- **Republicans (35%), Independents (49%), and Democrats (40%)** all identify inflation as their top issue. Notably, nearly **half of Independents** prioritize inflation above everything else, underscoring how central affordability concerns are for swing voters.
- **Republicans** place relatively more emphasis on the **economy (15%)** and **immigration (13%)** compared to other groups.
- **Democrats** rank **health care (24%)** significantly higher than Republicans and Independents, making it their second-most important issue after inflation.
- **Housing affordability**, while selected by only 6% overall, ranks higher among Democrats (9%) and Independents (5%) than among Republicans (2%).
- Issues like **crime, taxes, education, and abortion** show only modest variation across groups and remain secondary priorities compared to inflation.

### What this means:

This distribution highlights that—even amid partisan differences—voters are largely aligned on the primacy of affordability concerns. Inflation is not only the top issue overall, but it leads among Republicans, Independents, and Democrats alike, eclipsing all other issues by a wide margin. Meanwhile, secondary issues show predictable partisan variation, yet they remain well behind the dominant cost-of-living concern.

When asked in a different way, “How important are each of the following issues?” the dominance of affordability concerns became even more apparent. **Inflation and the cost of living topped the list, with 83% of voters saying it is an important issue.** This reflects not just intensity but **breadth**, showing that concern over rising costs extends far beyond those who selected it as their single top issue.



## ISSUES DRIVING THE VOTE

"How important are each of the following issues?"

ISSUE	OVERALL	GOP	IND	DEM
Inflation / Cost of Living	83	78	90	86
Economy	80	78	86	79
Health Care	77	65	89	84
Crime	64	75	67	51
Taxes & Revenue	64	68	67	58
Housing Affordability	61	49	75	71
Education	56	46	62	65
Immigration	47	63	43	29
Abortion	41	34	28	53
Child care	40	27	59	50

RMG Research - Oct. 23-28 • 800 registered voters • Margin  $\pm$  3.5%

Across political groups, the importance of inflation remained consistent:

- 78% of Republicans,
- 90% of Independents, and
- 86% of Democrats

All say inflation is important - making it one of the most cross-cutting issues in the entire poll.

The economy (80% overall) and health care (77%) formed the second tier of concerns, but neither reached the same level of near-universal urgency as inflation. Even issues that typically divide parties—such as crime, housing, taxes, immigration, abortion, and child care—registered far lower and showed wider partisan variation. In contrast, inflation stands out as the *shared*, overwhelming priority for voters across the political spectrum.



## » INFLATION

Inflation was a pervasive topic across nearly all listening sessions, as residents described how the **rising cost of living—particularly the cost of groceries—has placed increasing pressure on household budgets.** Many participants shared that their weekly food expenses have risen dramatically, straining family finances and forcing difficult trade-offs on those with fixed or limited incomes.

In conversation after conversation, people kept coming back to inflation — not as an abstract economic headline, but as something they feel every single time they pay rent, buy groceries, or fill their gas tank. What stood out most is how universal the experience is. For instance, when we were talking with younger workers in their twenties and thirties in De Pere at AmeriLux, they mentioned how they are doing “everything right” only to find that the basics have gotten out of reach. Rent that was \$700 a few years ago is now \$1,400. They told us about how the same apartments, with no major upgrades, are suddenly hundreds more per month. Several people shared versions of the same story: they’re working full-time, sometimes more, and still can’t save enough to get ahead, let alone buy a home.

Wages and prices came up together again and again. Even with steady jobs, people in Hayward felt they were “paid just enough to survive,” not enough to stay ahead of ever-rising costs. For younger workers especially, inflation has rewired what adulthood looks like. One young participant explained that between rent, groceries, and monthly bills, the idea of buying a home is completely out of reach. That sentiment got nods from all around the room.

A business owner in Beloit talked about rising prices for goods, especially after tariffs and post-COVID supply shifts. He explained that for him, updating prices constantly takes staff time and doesn’t increase his profits—it just makes customers more hesitant to spend.

For families, groceries, utilities, and basic expenses all add up, even for those who feel relatively secure.

***“We’re on fixed incomes — inflation is hitting everyone we know.”***

*- retired couple from Winnebago County*

***“Inflation is hitting hard — even fast food is expensive now.”***

*- young AmeriLux employee in De Pere*

***“Why is bottled Gatorade \$4? It’s the nickels and dimes that get you.”***

*- Hayward participant*

### POLLING

- 83% of Wisconsin voters say that “inflation / cost of living” will be important to how they vote (78% of GOP, 90% of independents, and 86% of Democrats)<sup>7</sup>
- In a national [Marquette Law School Poll](#)<sup>8</sup>, (Sept. 15–24, 2025) 58% said tariffs hurt the economy, 29% said they help, and 13% said they make no difference.

### DID YOU KNOW

- Seventy-four percent (74%) say that their incomes have been falling behind inflation this year. Just 22% say they have been keeping up.<sup>7</sup>
- This explains why inflation and costs of living tops lists of most important issues, no matter which way the question is asked.<sup>7</sup>
- One out of every two voters say that lower food costs would help the most with their personal finances.
- 92% say they have seen increases in food prices over the past year, including 71% who say they have seen large increases.

## » HOUSING

Besides the cost of groceries, the most common affordability topic that we came across in the *Wisconsin Speaks* listening sessions was in relation to affordable housing. We also found out in these listening sessions that the availability of housing usually came up as an issue as well. Across every region in the state, participants described feeling trapped by rising costs and stagnant wages.

This is not a new issue. We heard about unaffordable housing two years ago during our *What Wisconsin Wants* listening sessions as well, but unfortunately, the housing issue has gotten increasingly worse ([\*as home median prices have increased\*](#))<sup>11</sup> and people in the state are struggling. Without affordable housing options, it will continue to remain a major impediment to the economic future of the state of Wisconsin as wages are stagnant while essential costs are skyrocketing.

*Speaks* participants shared a sense of frustration over the significant rise in housing costs in recent years compared to years past. Many pointed out to us - especially the younger generations - that in their opinion, wages have not kept pace with the rising housing costs, making it harder to afford rent across the state in places that are becoming increasingly expensive. Some, like younger workers in the Green Bay/De Pere area noted that they think the growth of remote work has drawn people from larger cities to the Midwest because housing is “cheaper,” but that migration has driven up the prices across our state. (*We noticed that Green Bay was recently rated #1 for hybrid work*<sup>12</sup> [by Rent.com](#), so that seems to support the thought that came from one of our participants.)

Younger people at AmeriLux in De Pere cited living with roommates longer than they would have preferred in order to save money. Others cited having to make a decision between spending money on a wedding or building up savings for a down payment on a house.

***“Affordable housing is the biggest issue. I’m probably another five years away from being able to buy a house — unless I want to make a bad decision.”***

*- young AmeriLux employee in De Pere*

***“There’s a big divide and resentment among those who haven’t been able to join the housing market.”***

*- Kenosha area young parent*

### POLLING

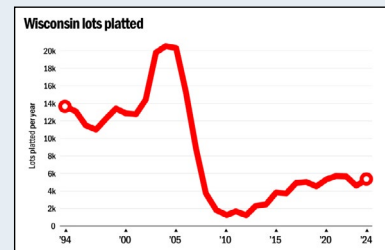
- 61% of voters say that housing affordability is an important issue for their vote, including three of every four independents (75%)<sup>7</sup>
- Two-thirds (67%) of voters say this is not a good time to buy a first home.
  - Among the 33% of voters who do not currently own their own homes, less than half (44%) believe it is even somewhat likely that they will ever buy a home.
- Voters favor a number of policies aimed at increasing the number of homes and making them more affordable.<sup>7</sup>
  - 77% favor increasing tax rebates for first time buyers.
  - 68% favor imposing rent controls.
  - 65% favor reducing taxes and regulations on builders.

### DID YOU KNOW

- Regulations imposed by local governments are being identified as a costly — and reversible — contributor to \$400,000 Wisconsin starter homes that are increasingly unattainable.<sup>9</sup>

Frustration was expressed by a handful of young employees at AmeriLux in De Pere over the government programs that are supposed to assist first time homebuyers. We heard people say they believe that the private loan options were more beneficial. Some of the women from northern and northeastern Wisconsin expressed the same thoughts in terms of their children being able to purchase a home someday.

- The creation of new real estate lots in Wisconsin is down 74% from its high 20 years ago with developers platting roughly 5,324 lots in 2024, data obtained by the Badger Institute from the Department of Administration's plat review office show.<sup>10</sup>



Source:  
The Badger  
Institute via  
Wisconsin  
Department of  
Administration  
data





## » HEALTH CARE

### Rural Health Care: Did you know?<sup>13</sup>

- There are 505 health professional shortage areas in Wisconsin, which is defined as areas where there are 3,500 or more patients for every provider, according to the U.S. Health Resources and Services Administration.
- In Wisconsin, 44 out of 72 counties are designated as shortage areas. Roughly, 1.7 million Wisconsin residents live in such a shortage area, with low-income residents disproportionately affected (According to the Cicero Institute).
- Wisconsin is expected to be short 2,263 doctors, including 942 primary care providers, by 2030. Nearly a third of physicians in Wisconsin are already within range of retirement.

The **affordability of health care** emerged as a significant and growing concern during the *Wisconsin Speaks* listening sessions. Unlike housing, this issue did not feature as prominently in the *What Wisconsin Wants* listening tour two years ago—though it was raised notably by women in the Milwaukee suburbs. The increased attention to health care costs in our most recent listening sessions reflects both changing economic pressures and lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Participants across the state expressed frustration with the **escalating costs of health care** and offered a range of perspectives on its root causes. Some attributed rising expenses to the **overreach of federal involvement**, arguing that state and local governments should exercise greater control over healthcare systems and cost management. Others illustrated their concerns through personal experiences—for example, one participant described the stark cost disparity between therapy sessions for insured versus uninsured individuals, citing it as evidence of a burdensome and inequitable healthcare structure.

*"It's a full-time job just to manage insurance. We owe a lot — we just don't know how much."*

*- Beloit parent of young kids*

*"Wisconsin's in the top five for health care costs — it's the hidden cost of living here."*

*- Brillion participant*

### POLLING

- 77% of Wisconsinites say that health care is very important to how they vote.
- 17% of voters say it will be the most important issue driving their vote (11% of GOP, 15% of independents, and 24% of Dem). This is the 2nd biggest issue behind "cost of living."<sup>7</sup>

### DID YOU KNOW

- According to the Wisconsin Manufacturers and Commerce 2024 Wisconsin Employer Survey, nearly half – 44 percent – of Badger State employers saw health care costs increase by more than 10 percent over the last year. Another 41 percent of businesses saw costs go up between six and 10 percent.<sup>14</sup>
- 87% of Wisconsinites say it is easy to access the health care they need close to where they live.
- Asked about policies to improve health care, majorities of both parties identified three to make health care better:
  - Requiring health care providers to disclose costs before providing services - 83% including 83% of Republicans and 83% of Democrats.
  - Giving individuals more control over their own health care decisions - 81% including 81% of Republicans and 83% of Democrats.

Numerous participants also reflected on how the **COVID-19 pandemic exposed deep flaws** in the healthcare system. This came up prominently while we were in Fond du Lac, when speaking with a group of northern and northeastern Wisconsin women, and back in De Pere for our second listening session there. Many pointed to the influence of **pharmaceutical companies and insurance providers** on doctors, hospitals, and overall care delivery as a key driver of inefficiency and mistrust.

Together, these discussions highlighted a growing recognition that health care affordability is not only an economic issue but also a structural one—shaped by policy, access, and trust in the institutions that deliver care.

- Allowing individuals how much health insurance to buy - 69% including 71% of Republicans and 67% of Democrats.
- Both Republicans and Democrats say that having the federal government take over the system or requiring every American to buy an amount of health insurance determined by the federal government would make things worse: 48% of GOP respondents and 29% of Dem respondents said it would get “much worse.”



## » CHILD CARE

The **affordability of child care** continues to be a major concern for Wisconsin residents across the state. Participants in our *Wisconsin Speaks* listening sessions frequently described the difficult trade-offs families face—often having to decide whether one parent should stay home to avoid prohibitively high child care costs or continue working only to see an entire paycheck consumed by child care expenses.

Beyond affordability, the **availability of child care** emerged as a significant barrier within communities. In Beloit, one participant told us that child care is a top issue for the city and a number of organizations as the area had a couple of big closures during and right after the pandemic. Participants pointed to multiple factors contributing to this shortage, including **low wages for child care workers**, the **high operating costs** of child care centers driven in part by **state regulations**, and an ongoing **shortage of available labor**. In several areas, parents reported long waitlists and a lack of open slots for new children at existing facilities.

These combined challenges underscore a growing strain on Wisconsin's families and workforce. Without access to affordable and reliable child care, parents—particularly those in dual-income or single-parent households—struggle to maintain stable employment and contribute fully to the state's economy.



*"If you can't work because you can't afford child care, you can't afford a house. It breaks the whole system."*

- Burlington participant

*"It's impossible to make money on child care — good regulations, but no way to sustain the model."*

- Burlington participant

### POLLING

The most concerning issue regarding child care is the high cost of child care for families, (55% all voters, 50% GOP, 61% Dems). Only 10% identified provider pay and only 8% identified provider shortages as the most concerning issue.<sup>14</sup>

FROM [SPEAKS POLLING](#):

- 65% of Wisconsin voters cite high costs as the biggest issue with child care currently, while 10% say there are not enough child care providers and 7% say child care teachers are not paid enough.<sup>7</sup>
- 40% of voters say that child care is an issue driving their vote. However, while only 27% of the GOP respondents say it is, nearly 6 in 10 (60%) say it's an issue.<sup>7</sup>

### DID YOU KNOW

- The average price of center-based care for one infant is over \$11,900 per year.<sup>15</sup>
- Half of providers in the state report having a waitlist for their facility<sup>16</sup>
- Lead child care teachers earn an average of \$13.55 an hour.<sup>16</sup>



## » STATE AND LOCAL TAXES

Across listening sessions, participants expressed a common frustration: Wisconsin families and business owners feel overtaxed yet under-served. This sentiment was voiced in both rural and urban communities, reflecting a perception that taxes—whether property, income, or sales—have increased without corresponding improvements in local infrastructure, education, or public services.

One of the more powerful quotes we heard about taxes while on this listening tour was this one we heard while we were in Elkhorn: *"We're paying property taxes on money that's already been taxed. We're paying sales tax on our money that's already been taxed."*

Overwhelmingly we found in our travels of the state that Wisconsin residents want taxes to be straightforward and transparent. People expressed that they want to see broader tax reform, but there were different ideas proposed on how to get to this point - with some saying that it might be more effective to lower the tax rate instead of introducing temporary exemptions or credits.

In our online survey of over 100 business leaders and conservative activists, the response was that taxes are the biggest issue - it ranked number one when we asked participants to rank top issues facing all of Wisconsin and when we asked participants what are the top issues facing you and your family.

Many residents feel that while Wisconsin's tax rates are among the highest in the Midwest, the "value" of what they receive in return is unclear. From deteriorating roads to bureaucratic inefficiencies, participants questioned whether their tax dollars are being managed effectively.

*"We're paying more every year, but we can't see where it's going."*

Residents across Wisconsin feel that the state's tax structure no longer reflects local realities. The dominant perception is not simply that taxes are "too high," but that the system lacks fairness, efficiency, and visible community return. Participants seek a recalibration—greater transparency, local flexibility, and tangible evidence that their tax dollars are improving daily life.

***"The dumbest tax is property tax — why are we paying taxes on something we already own?"***

*- De Pere participant*

***"If we have extra money, give it back to the taxpayer — don't be wasteful."***

*- Oshkosh participant*

***"If I didn't have family here, I'd move to a state with no income tax."***

*- De Pere participant*

### POLLING

- 64% of Wisconsin voters say that taxes and revenue are very important.<sup>7</sup>
- 18% say that lower taxes would help the most with their personal finances.

### DID YOU KNOW

- A [survey](#)<sup>17</sup> of registered Wisconsin voters conducted in December 2022 showed a **plurality of voters – across partisan lines – support eliminating the income tax AND that nearly 6 in 10 think that state taxes are too high.**
- Wisconsin maintains competitive sales and property tax structures but ranks near the middle of the pack overall due to burdensome taxes on labor and investment.<sup>18</sup> Wisconsin ranks #21 overall right now.
- According to the [Crowe Wisconsin study](#)<sup>19</sup>, that 7.65% top rate is relatively high nationally: the study notes Wisconsin's top bracket rate is among the top-10 highest in the country.
- [Rocket Mortgage](#)<sup>20</sup> ranks Wisconsin **8th highest** among states for effective property tax rate (1.51%) as of its 2023 data.

## 2. WORKFORCE CHALLENGES AND TALENT RETENTION THREATEN WISCONSIN'S ECONOMIC FUTURE.

A common theme across Wausau, Beloit, Brillion, and Hayward included:

- “Brain drain” of young workers leaving the state
- Severe worker shortages in teaching, manufacturing, trades, child care, and health care
- Barriers to employment caused by the benefits cliff
- Need for apprenticeships, trade programs, and talent pipelines

Employers and workers alike stressed that Wisconsin cannot compete or grow without a stronger, more stable workforce.

### » HIGHER WAGES

The topic of **good-paying jobs** surfaced in nearly every *Wisconsin Speaks* listening session. Across regions and industries, participants emphasized a shared frustration: **wages are not keeping pace with the rising costs of child care, health care, housing, and inflation.** Many residents described feeling that despite working full time—or even multiple jobs—they are struggling to maintain financial stability.

At the same time, **business owners and employers** shared their own set of challenges, particularly around **labor shortages and workforce readiness.** Business leaders in Wausau, Elkhorn, and Brillion reported persistent difficulties in filling open positions, especially in the skilled trades. Employers spoke of investing time and resources into recruiting and training workers, only to find a limited pool of qualified candidates.

These parallel frustrations—from workers unable to get ahead and employers unable to find the talent they need—reflect a deeper **disconnect in**

*“We don’t have jobs with the salaries to afford \$1,600 for a one-bedroom apartment.”*

*- De Pere participant*

*“People making \$20 an hour are still struggling.”*

*- Milwaukee parent*

*“Everything’s doubled — groceries, rent, utilities — but paychecks haven’t.”*

*- DePere AmeriLux participant*

#### POLLING

- 42% (36% GOP, 49% Dems, 35% Indep) indicate that a good paying job is hard to find as their biggest concern about the job market, whereas 21% believe people do not have the proper training for a good paying job.<sup>6</sup>
- 74% of Wisconsin voters say their income has been falling behind inflation this year, while only 22% say they have been keeping up.<sup>7</sup>

## DID YOU KNOW

**Wisconsin's labor market.** Participants across the state underscored the need for stronger workforce pipelines, greater investment in vocational and technical education, and more collaboration between schools, training institutions, and local industries to prepare workers for the jobs that sustain Wisconsin's economy.

- Wisconsin's unemployment rate was 3.1% in August, 1.2 percentage points below the national rate of 4.3%. Wisconsin's labor force decreased by 7,100 over the month and 36,900 over the year. The number of people employed decreased 6,000 over the month to 3,045,400 employed, down 40,400 over the year.<sup>21</sup>
- According to [the Badger Institute's](#) analysis<sup>22</sup> of a U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics' monthly survey of employers, average real weekly earnings for private-sector workers in Wisconsin have declined since early 2021, once inflation is taken into account.





## » K-12 SCHOOLS PREPARING STUDENTS FOR SUCCESS AFTER GRADUATION

### 2024 NAEP PERFORMANCE<sup>23</sup>

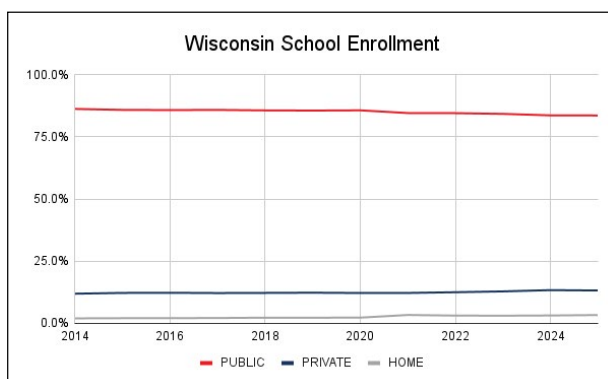
- **4th grade reading:** 61% grade level or higher, 31% college/career-ready or higher (34th nationally)
- **8th grade reading:** 70% grade level or higher, 31% college/career-ready or higher (28th nationally)
- **4th grade mathematics:** 77% grade level or higher, 42% college/career-ready or higher (29th nationally)
- **8th grade mathematics:** 69% grade level or higher, 37% college/career-ready or higher (8th nationally)
- Wisconsin scores are lower than they were 20 years ago, but Wisconsin's national ranking is roughly the same.

### 2024-2025 ENROLLMENT

- 963,330 students
- 805,881 public (83.7%)
- 126,355 private (13.1%)
- 31,094 home (3.2%)

[Overall enrollment has dropped 51,056<sup>24</sup>](#) over the last 10 years, and it is expected to drop 10,000 per year for the next 10 years.

- Public is only 2.2% less of the enrollment pie than 10 years ago.
- Private choice is 3.2% more of the pie.
- Private tuition is 2.2% less of the pie.
- Home schooling is 1.2% more of the pie.



*"Only 50–60% of kids are at grade level. Yet schools call themselves elite."*

*"My child's in the second-worst district in the state. He's thriving, but because of what we do at home."*

- Beloit area parent

*"Just teach reading, writing, math, science — not ideology."*

- Elkhorn participant

### POLLING

- 91% of voters say that focusing on basics like reading and writing would improve their local public schools.<sup>7</sup>
- 79% say that improving classroom discipline and reducing class size would help.<sup>7</sup>
- 78% think that requiring all students to attain proficiency in English and banning cell phones for students in class would improve schools.<sup>7</sup>
- 74% say that schools would be improved by raising academic standards.<sup>7</sup>

### DID YOU KNOW

- There are [421 School Districts<sup>25</sup>](#) in the state of Wisconsin.

Concerns about the **quality and effectiveness of Wisconsin's K-12 education system** were raised repeatedly throughout the *Wisconsin Speaks* listening sessions. According to participants from Oshkosh, Kenosha, and Milwaukee, schools are not adequately preparing students for success after graduation. Attendees offered a wide range of theories for this perceived decline, including:

- Understaffing and a shortage of qualified teachers
- Low teacher pay and high rates of burnout
- Overreliance on or ineffective use of classroom technology
- Lack of transparency and communication with parents regarding curriculum content
- Declining academic performance, particularly in reading and mathematics

Participants emphasized that **educational experiences and outcomes vary significantly across the state**. For example, a parent from Beloit shared that his elementary-school aged son “never gets homework,” suggesting inconsistent academic expectations between districts.

In Milwaukee, parents who enrolled their children in **choice or charter schools** highlighted different priorities. Parents described these schools as offering a stronger sense of community and a more personal, “family-like” atmosphere compared to traditional public schools. For these parents, the ability to select a school aligned with their values and expectations was a key factor in their decision-making.

Overall, these conversations revealed a deep concern about whether Wisconsin's public education system is equipping students with the skills, discipline, and support needed to succeed in higher education, technical training, and the workforce.



## » A GOVERNMENT BENEFITS SYSTEM THAT ENCOURAGES WORK

A recurring frustration expressed during the *Wisconsin Speaks* listening sessions was the “benefits cliff”—the point at which individuals receiving public assistance risk losing essential benefits if their income increases even slightly. This issue was raised by a business owner in Burlington, who shared his experience trying to reward and promote dedicated employees. Despite his willingness to offer additional work and higher pay, he explained that he has workers who felt unable to accept raises because doing so would result in the loss of critical government assistance. He described the situation this way:

*“We have lots of folks over in our shop that receive assistance. If they earn one dollar more, right, they lose thousands of dollars. We would love to give it to them. You know, it’s their purpose. It’s their community.”*

This anecdote reflects a broader tension within Wisconsin’s labor market, where well-intentioned public assistance programs can inadvertently discourage upward mobility. Both employers and employees expressed a desire for policy reforms that would allow workers to advance their earnings gradually without facing sudden financial penalties.

***“Counselors literally tell them: don’t take the promotion, don’t take overtime.”***

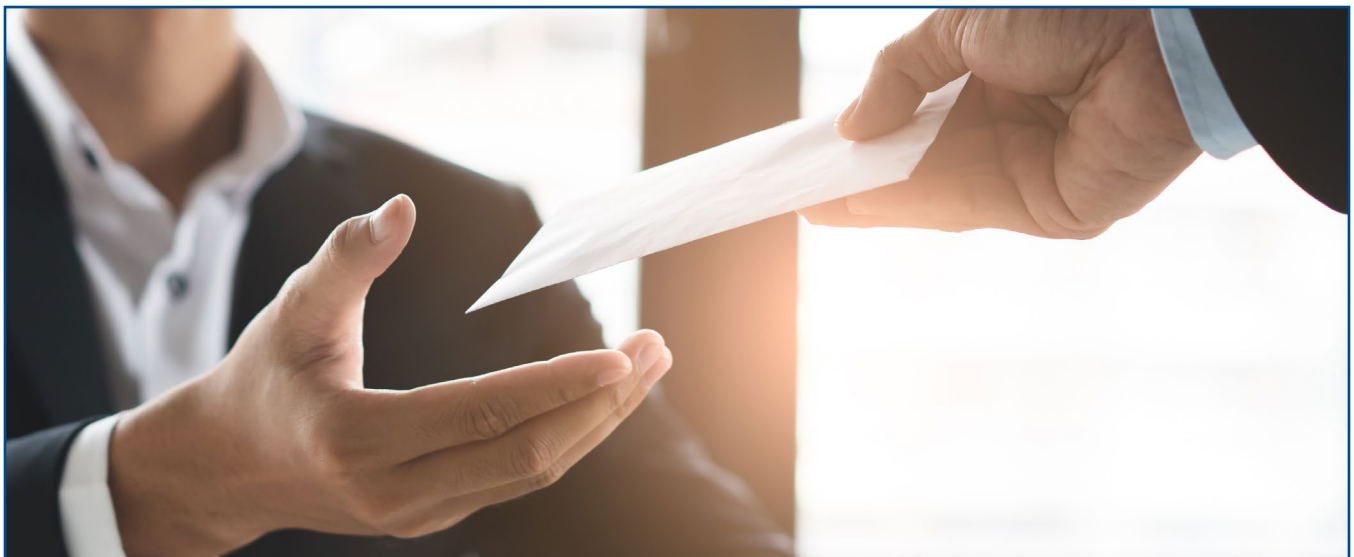
*- Beloit area participant*

***“If they earn one dollar more, they lose thousands.”***

*- Experience Burlington participant*

### DID YOU KNOW

- While the exact cliff depends on a household’s location, size and the type of benefits received, a 2020 analysis by UW-Madison researchers found cliffs exist for a family of three earning between \$21,960 to \$32,940 or as high as \$43,290.<sup>26</sup>
- A project advisor for the Federal Reserve says about 750,000 people in Wisconsin are impacted by “benefits cliff-related issues,” arguing this is holding back the state’s workforce.<sup>27</sup>





### 3. STRONGER FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES

People feel less safe and less connected in their communities, citing crime, behavioral issues, and weakened family or community structures. This concern is not limited to crime alone, but to a broader breakdown in the systems, norms, and community structures that once anchored stability.

- Behavioral decline in K-12 schools
- Economic stress making communities feel more fragile.
  - Financial instability leading to higher stress, more substance abuse, social conflict.
- Rising crime and public safety concerns
  - More visible drug usage (Hayward session)
  - Safety of their children in the community (Milwaukee session)



## » MENTAL HEALTH

Mental health emerged as an underlying theme across multiple listening sessions, often connected to broader social, economic, and community challenges. Participants expressed concern over the **emotional strain** caused by economic pressures such as housing costs, child care expenses, health care affordability, and stagnant wages. These pressures contribute to **stress, anxiety, and burnout** among working adults and families.

Social cohesion and community stability were also linked to mental health. Residents noted the effects of **declining civility, juvenile crime, and family fragmentation**, highlighting how a lack of support networks and community engagement can exacerbate feelings of isolation and emotional fatigue. One parent emphasized the consequences of inconsistent discipline and guidance, remarking on the societal impacts of children perceiving that “choices have no consequences.”

Access to mental health services was another area of concern. Participants cited the **high cost of therapy and gaps in coverage** as barriers to care, with particular frustration over disparities in access for insured versus uninsured individuals. COVID-19 was noted as a stressor that **exposed vulnerabilities in the healthcare system**, including mental health care, revealing gaps in both resources and systemic support.

Finally, the interplay of social, economic, and environmental pressures—ranging from inflation and job insecurity to the decline of rural community institutions—was seen as a contributing factor to **emotional strain**, reinforcing the need for policies that support both economic stability and mental well-being.

*“Mental health for me is because a lot of us have not been taught even as a child growing up, how to deal with different things.”*

*- Milwaukee parent*

*“The top issues employees talk about aren’t pay — it’s family stress, loss, and mental health.”*

*- Brillion area employer*

### POLLING

- In February 2021, 36.4% of adults in Wisconsin reported symptoms of anxiety or depression. 18.6% were unable to get needed counseling or therapy.<sup>44</sup>

### DID YOU KNOW

- Wisconsin is facing a mental health crisis, something that has been acknowledged by the legislature and by Governor Evers when he announced 2023 as the “Year of Mental Health.” Data from the [National Institute of Mental Health](#)<sup>28</sup> shows that nationally, almost 23% of adults are living with mental health issues, and that increases to 49.5% for children between the ages of 13-18. At the same time, a [2019 Department of Health Services report](#)<sup>29</sup> estimates that 47% of adults with mental illness in Wisconsin are unserved and [demand is outpacing supply](#)<sup>30</sup> since the start of the pandemic.
- Wisconsin is facing a mental health provider [shortage](#)<sup>31</sup>. Statewide, there is one provider for every 470 residents. However, in northern and western counties that ratio can climb as high as [13,030:1](#)<sup>32</sup>.
- The shortage is even more apparent in [rural areas of the state](#)<sup>33</sup>.

## » CRIME AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Public safety emerged as a recurring concern across multiple *Wisconsin Speaks* listening sessions, often linked to broader themes of community trust, family stability, and social order. While the intensity of concern varied by region, participants consistently described a growing unease about safety in schools, neighborhoods, and downtown areas — and a sense that moral discipline and community connection are eroding. From Beloit to Milwaukee, residents voiced concern over **juvenile crime, drug use, and family fragmentation**—issues they see as symptoms of deeper societal challenges. These Wisconsinites feel that the erosion of discipline, accountability, and moral structure has contributed to behavioral issues in both schools and neighborhoods.

This recurring theme underscored a widespread belief that **social order depends as much on shared moral norms as on formal laws**. Many participants advocated for renewed partnerships between **families, schools, and faith communities** to help restore a sense of accountability, purpose, and collective responsibility within their neighborhoods. Participants - especially those in Milwaukee - expressed a feeling of holding together the social fabric with limited institutional or community support—a poignant reminder that civic health is not only about policy but also about human connection, mutual trust, and moral renewal.

In Milwaukee, parents voiced acute worries about **violence and bullying in public schools**, noting that safety was a major factor in their decision to send children to private or faith-based institutions.

*“My daughter fought 365 days — every day she went to school they tried to jump her.”*

Parents expressed a desire for structure, mentorship, and moral guidance as much as for policing, suggesting that the roots of crime are social and educational as much as criminal. Many felt that **mentorship programs and behavioral support** could reduce incidents of violence and improve respect within schools.

In smaller towns and rural regions, discussions about safety were more often tied to **drug use, family instability, and moral decline** than to violent crime. Participants described a breakdown of the traditional “village” — neighbors looking out for one another — and called for **stronger civic and faith-based networks** to prevent problems before they become policing issues.

*“We’ve got one of the highest crime rates in the counties — drugs everywhere.”*

- Hayward participant

*“Crime and education are big ones — we worry about our granddaughters’ safety.”*

- Oshkosh area participant

### POLLING

- 64% of Wisconsin voters say that crime is a very important issue to how they vote.<sup>7</sup>

### DID YOU KNOW

- The city of Milwaukee had 1,431 violent crimes per 100,000 based on FBI data from 2024 on murder, rape, robbery and aggravated assault.<sup>34</sup>
- Wisconsin continues to see just a little more than half as much violent crime than the rest of the United States, according to the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s Uniform Crime Reporting database.<sup>35</sup>



## » AGRICULTURE

During the *Wisconsin Speaks* listening sessions, residents raised concerns about the **decline of small family farms**. A participant in Elkhorn described what she called the “death of the family farm,” noting that **loss of work, economic pressures, and changing agricultural markets** are contributing to the closure or downsizing of farms across the state. This theme reflects broader anxieties about **rural economic stability, generational continuity in farming, and the preservation of Wisconsin’s agricultural heritage**. Participants emphasized that supporting small farms is not only an economic issue but also a cultural one, as these farms are deeply tied to local communities, traditions, and the state’s identity.

Participants noted that younger generations are **less likely to stay on the farm**, citing rising costs, consolidation pressures, and lack of profitability as barriers to succession. Equipment and land prices have become prohibitive, while commodity prices and margins remain unstable.

*“It’s not that young people don’t want to farm — they just can’t afford to.”*

*“The big guys can survive a bad year — we can’t. That’s the small farms. And that we’re losing work at them.”*

*- Elkhorn area participant*

*“I can’t find my workers locally. My farm labor are all H-2A work visas from Mexico. \$18.50 an hour.”*

*- Wausau area participant*

### DID YOU KNOW

- Wisconsin agriculture is a big economic driver contributing \$116.3 billion annually to our state’s economy.<sup>36</sup>
- Wisconsin agriculture provides jobs.<sup>36</sup>
  - Annually, 353,900 jobs or 9.5% of the state’s employment.
  - On-farm activity contributes 143,690 jobs.
  - Processing contributes 298,400 jobs.

Some connected the decline of small farms to the **erosion of rural identity and mental health**, pointing to isolation, financial stress, and suicide risk in the agricultural community. Others worried that **policy and market forces favor large producers**, leaving smaller farmers without support or leverage.



## ISSUES RAISED BUT WITH LESS INTENSITY

During the listening sessions, a handful of additional issues came up from time to time, but they were not a major focus of the conversations. These topics were mentioned briefly or by a small number of participants and did not spark extended discussion or repeated emphasis. While they are worth noting as part of the broader landscape of concerns, they did not dominate the dialogue or emerge as top priorities compared to the issues that participants raised most often and with the greatest intensity.

### » MARIJUANA LEGALIZATION

Participants in the *Wisconsin Speaks* sessions expressed a generally **open attitude toward the possibility of marijuana legalization**, though their perspectives varied. Several noted potential **economic and social benefits**, including the generation of tax revenue and the potential to **reduce crime** associated with illicit markets. Some participants highlighted the fact that **Wisconsinites currently travel to neighboring states, such as Michigan, to purchase marijuana**, framing this as a “loss” of revenue that could be captured within the state.

Other participants expressed more caution, raising questions about **public health, safety, and regulation**, suggesting that any policy changes would need to carefully consider these concerns. Overall, the discussions revealed a **nuanced perspective**: residents are open to exploring legalization but want policies that balance economic opportunity with responsible oversight.

*“We’re giving millions in tax revenue to Illinois and Michigan.”*

*“Tax it, regulate it, and use the money for schools and child care.”*

#### POLLING

- In a [June 2025 Marquette Law School poll](#)<sup>37</sup>, **67%** of Wisconsin registered voters said they support legalizing adult-use (recreational) marijuana, while **33%** opposed.
- IRG polling from May 2024 found that 65% of rural voters favor legalizing cannabis<sup>4</sup>.

#### DID YOU KNOW

- Marijuana (cannabis with significant THC) is **illegal** in Wisconsin for both recreational and medical use under state law.
- The Legislative Fiscal Bureau estimates Wisconsin would make about [\\$166 million a year](#)<sup>38</sup> in taxes if it legalized recreational marijuana.

## » DNR ISSUES/NATURAL RESOURCES AND WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT

Participants—particularly those in the **northwoods**—highlighted concerns related to **natural resources and state policies** governing activities such as fishing, hunting, and recreation in Wisconsin's parks and lakes. Our Northwoods participants expressed frustration with the **Department of Natural Resources (DNR)**, suggesting that the agency has **strayed from its original mission** of serving the needs of local communities and protecting natural resources.

Specific concerns included the **management of deer hunting zones**, where participants advocated for a **simpler and more transparent approach**. Additionally, the **bureaucratic handling of the wolf population** emerged as a major issue. Residents noted that the **unchecked presence of wolves** continues to create challenges for local wildlife management and traditional practices such as **wild rice harvesting**, which is culturally and economically significant in the region.

Overall, these discussions reflected a broader sentiment that **resource management policies must better balance ecological protection with local needs and traditions**, ensuring sustainable use of Wisconsin's natural heritage.



*"The DNR has lost its way — it's managed out of Madison, not the Northwoods."*

*"We just want to shoot deer — it shouldn't be this complicated."*

*"Wolves are everywhere — they need to be managed."*

### DID YOU KNOW

- The Department of Natural Resources is one of the largest state regulatory agencies with vast oversight affecting Wisconsin industry and recreation. The department regulates Wisconsin's waterways, surface, and groundwater monitoring, oversees environmental remediation processes and issues permits. Its reach is wide and touches almost all aspects of life in Wisconsin.<sup>39</sup>
- The department is organized with a headquarters office in Madison, five regional offices and over 165 other field stations and offices. The central office staff assists the secretary in directing the regions, which carry out the field operations of the department.<sup>39</sup>



## » ABORTION POLICIES AND ACCESS

Perhaps surprisingly—and in contrast to expectations based on past polling—the **topic of abortion policy and access** was among the least discussed issues during the *Wisconsin Speaks* listening sessions. While previous data suggest that this issue remains deeply important to a small but vocal segment of Wisconsinites across the political spectrum, it did not emerge as a primary concern in most conversations.

In the past, IRG has found that the issue of abortion was a main driver in the 2025 Supreme Court Race and IRG found it to be a significant voting issue in our *What Wisconsin Women Want* report from 2024.

In contrast, the topics of **adoption and the foster care system** surfaced in several sessions, most notably in Burlington. One participant who had personally adopted a child through the foster system shared that the **north side of Milwaukee has one of the highest populations of foster children in the country**, with “thousands” of children lacking permanent homes. He described his experience navigating the system as **lengthy, bureaucratic, and under-resourced**, emphasizing that there are **too many barriers** for families willing to become foster parents.

These discussions revealed that while abortion access may not currently dominate public discourse in Wisconsin, the **broader challenges of family support systems—particularly adoption and foster care—remain pressing**. Participants’ stories underscored the need for more efficient processes, better support for foster families, and renewed attention to the children and parents most affected by systemic gaps in care.

### POLLING

- 82% of all voters thought abortion was an important issue and 70% of Independents said abortion was an important issue.<sup>1</sup>
- IRG polling shows that only 41% of voters say abortion is an important issue for 2026 - less than immigration, education, etc. This includes 52% of Dems and 28% of independents.

### DID YOU KNOW

- The Wisconsin Supreme Court’s Decision in *Josh Kaul v. Joel Urmanski* in Summer 2025 effectively invalidates the 1849 total ban on abortion, but leaves in place the 20 week ban on abortion passed in 2015. The same day it issued its decision in *Kaul v. Urmanski*, it dismissed a broader challenge to the abortion law in a case brought by Planned Parenthood that it previously granted review on last year. (*Planned Parenthood of Wisconsin v. Urmanski*) Any future challenges to the abortion law from the courts would have to restart in circuit court or be brought as a new original action<sup>40</sup>.
- The number of abortions in Wisconsin has been rising since late 2023, analysis shows.<sup>41</sup>



## » INFRASTRUCTURE: ROADS & TRANSPORTATION

Although mentioned only a handful of times during the *Wisconsin Speaks* listening sessions, **road conditions** emerged as a point of concern for some participants. One individual in Hayward noted that **Wisconsin roads present particular challenges for truck drivers**, highlighting the increased wear and difficulty they experience compared with passenger vehicles.

While not as widely discussed as other topics, these comments underscore the **importance of maintaining infrastructure** to support both everyday commuters and the state's commercial transportation needs.



*"Drive a semi — you'll feel every bump. Roads are terrible."*

*"We're paying taxes for good roads, but we're driving on railroad tracks."*

### DID YOU KNOW

- Wisconsin's highways were ranked 40th of the 50 states in 2022.<sup>42</sup>
- Between 2010 and 2023, the share of local roads in Wisconsin rated as either excellent or very good fell by 9.5 percentage points.<sup>43</sup>

## CONCLUSION: MAIN TAKEAWAYS

Reflecting on the past six months of statewide engagement, the *Wisconsin Speaks* initiative has demonstrated the transformative power of intentional listening in shaping policy priorities and strengthening community trust. Through these conversations, we discovered that approximately 70% of the issues Wisconsinites care about are shared across regions and demographics—and these are the very concerns residents most want elevated in the public arena. This consistency reveals something important: when people feel heard, their priorities cut across geography, age, race, and political identity more than public debate often suggests.

The insights drawn from this process reaffirm that sustained dialogue—particularly when it includes diverse voices—produces a more accurate and more actionable understanding of the challenges facing families, workers, and employers. Participants made clear that addressing complex issues such as affordability, public safety, workforce sustainability, and access to education requires acknowledging the distinct lived experiences of people in every part of the state. From rural towns navigating workforce shortages to urban neighborhoods grappling with rising costs, residents emphasized that solutions must reflect both shared statewide concerns and community-specific realities.

### What it all means: Merging listening sessions, surveys, and polling

When we compare what people raised in-person, in surveys, and in polling, a more nuanced story emerges. In conversations and open-ended surveys, residents were far more likely to bring up housing, education, and child care, as top-of-mind challenges. But in statewide polling—where responses are forced-choice and ranked—those same issues dropped, while inflation, economic anxiety, and health care dominated.



There are a few ways to interpret this gap. One possibility is that people fold education, child care, and housing concerns into their broader worries about inflation and the economy—they see these issues as part of the same cost-of-living pressure. Another is that it highlights a deeper misalignment between some candidates' messaging and what actually motivates voters. Leaders often elevate issues that resonate in community discussions but barely register in polling's top-tier priorities. That doesn't mean those issues don't matter or shouldn't be improved—strong schools, stable housing, and accessible child care remain foundational to long-term prosperity. But it does mean politicians should not assume that progress on these fronts alone will translate into electoral rewards. Voters are, right now, laser-focused on affordability and economic pressures above all else.



This initiative also underscored the enduring importance of collaborative leadership at both the grassroots and governmental levels. Meaningful reform, participants emphasized, must reflect the shared interests, creativity, and values of the people of Wisconsin—and must be informed by ongoing feedback rather than one-time engagement. People want leaders who listen, adapt, and remain accountable to the communities they serve.

### **Building on the momentum and looking toward next year**

The next phase of *Wisconsin Speaks* will take this foundation and deepen it. Plans include:

- Conducting interviews with Trump voters who did not vote in the last governor’s race to better understand what policies drive them.
- Expanding to additional quarterly polling focused on “kitchen table” issues, the solutions people trust, and the intensity behind those preferences.
- Working directly with community leaders and partners—through the IRG Action Fund—to translate what we’ve learned into concrete, community-rooted policy solutions.

These next steps will ensure that *Wisconsin Speaks* remains an ongoing, data-informed, people-centered effort capable of adapting to new challenges and opportunities across the state.

Looking ahead, the success of *Wisconsin Speaks* rests on a continued commitment to open, inclusive, and adaptive engagement. Ongoing listening and collaboration will be essential to developing policies that not only respond to



immediate challenges but also foster long-term vitality for communities across the Badger State. This work is not merely about gathering input; it is about strengthening trust, elevating local wisdom, and ensuring that policy outcomes genuinely reflect the everyday experiences of the people they affect.

At IRG, our commitment to learning and listening does not end with this report. We will continue building bridges into communities across Wisconsin—hearing directly from residents, understanding their challenges, and partnering with them to strengthen the social and economic fabric of our state. The conversations that powered *Wisconsin Speaks* are only the beginning of a sustained effort to ensure that every Wisconsinite has a voice in shaping the future.

## EXHIBIT A: SURVEY RESULTS

Each participant filled out a written survey, and we also offered an online option for anyone who preferred to respond digitally or participate only via survey. Altogether, more than 200 people across the state completed the survey, giving us a broad mix of perspectives from different geographical communities, age groups, and backgrounds. Their responses helped us better understand what people think are the top issues affecting their daily lives and this added valuable context to the conversations we had in person.

### **Top Takeaways of Online Survey**


- Top Issues facing all of Wisconsin:
  1. State and local taxes
  2. Inflation increasing the costs of things my family needs
  3. K-12 Schools preparing students for success after graduation
- Top Issues facing you and your family:
  1. State and local taxes
  2. Inflation increasing the costs of things my family needs
  3. Affordable Health Care

### **Top Takeaways of Participant Survey**

- Top Issues facing Wisconsin:
  - #1 Issue: Affordable Housing (15%)
  - #2 Issue: K-12 Education & Inflation (tied) (14%)
  - #3 Issue: State and Local Taxes and Affordable Health Care (tied) (11%)
- Top Issues facing you and your family:
  - #1 Issue: Inflation increasing the costs of things my family needs (22%)
  - #2 Issue: Affordable Housing (20%)
  - #3 Issue: State and Local Taxes (15%)
  - #4 Issue: Affordable Health Care (10%)
  - #5 Issue: Good-paying jobs (8%)

We found that the survey from the in-person participants lines up more with what we learned from our polling in terms of top issues facing Wisconsin.

**SURVEY QUESTIONS:** The questions on the survey were as follows (*and select sampling of answers received is listed below*):

 INSTITUTE FOR  
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**Wisconsin Speaks: Listening, Learning, Leading**


**Policy Survey Sweepstakes: \$100 gift card to one random survey respondent!**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

EMAIL \_\_\_\_\_  
(All survey responses will remain anonymous. Valid email & zip code are required for entry.)

ZIP CODE I RESIDE IN: \_\_\_\_\_

Politically, do you consider yourself (check one):

 ☐ Strong Left ☐ Lean Left ☐ Lean Right ☐ Strong Right ☐ None ☐ Other: \_\_\_\_\_


**ALL WISCONSINITES:** Of the following issues, pick the 5 top issues you believe are preventing Wisconsinites from being able to achieve the American Dream. Label them 1 through 5, with 1 being the biggest obstacle. \*Note, not all issues below will receive a number.

- \_\_\_\_\_ Affordable childcare
- \_\_\_\_\_ Affordable healthcare
- \_\_\_\_\_ Affordable housing
- \_\_\_\_\_ Good paying jobs
- \_\_\_\_\_ Abortion policies and access
- \_\_\_\_\_ Inflation increasing the costs of things my family needs
- \_\_\_\_\_ Mental health
- \_\_\_\_\_ K-12 schools preparing students for success after graduation
- \_\_\_\_\_ State and local taxes
- \_\_\_\_\_ Crime and public safety
- \_\_\_\_\_ OTHER \_\_\_\_\_

**YOU PERSONALLY:** Of the same issues, pick the top 5 issues that affect what is holding YOU OR YOUR FAMILY back from success over the next 5 years and label them 1 through 5, with 1 being the top issue that is holding you back. \*Note, not all issues below will receive a number.

- \_\_\_\_\_ Affordable childcare
- \_\_\_\_\_ Affordable healthcare
- \_\_\_\_\_ Affordable housing
- \_\_\_\_\_ Good paying jobs
- \_\_\_\_\_ Abortion policies and access
- \_\_\_\_\_ Inflation increasing the costs of things my family needs
- \_\_\_\_\_ Mental health
- \_\_\_\_\_ K12 schools preparing students for success after graduation
- \_\_\_\_\_ State and local taxes
- \_\_\_\_\_ Crime and public safety
- \_\_\_\_\_ OTHER \_\_\_\_\_

(over)

 INSTITUTE FOR  
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Thinking of Wisconsin as a place to live, work, and play, what is Wisconsin really good at?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

What is the one thing you wish could be improved in Wisconsin?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

What are your **top three** ideas for improving Wisconsin?

1. \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\*official sweepstakes rules found at  
<https://reforminggovernment.org/official-rules-2025-policy-survey-sweepstakes/>. Please reach out with any questions to [info@reforminggovernment.org](mailto:info@reforminggovernment.org).

**PROMPT 1:** ALL WISCONSINITES: Of the following issues, pick the 5 top issues you believe are preventing Wisconsinites from being able to achieve the American Dream. Label them 1 through 5, with 1 being the biggest obstacle. \*Note, not all issues below will receive a number. The issues listed as options were affordable child care, affordable health care, affordable housing, good paying jobs, abortion policies and access, inflation increasing the costs of things my family needs, mental health, K-12 schools preparing students for success after graduation, state and local taxes, crime and public safety, and other.

**PROMPT 2:** YOU PERSONALLY: Of the following issues, pick the 5 top issues that affect what is holding YOU OR YOUR FAMILY back from success over the next 5 years and label them 1 through 5, with 1 being the top issue that is holding you back. \*Note, not all issues below will receive a number. The issues listed as options were affordable child care, affordable health care, affordable housing, good paying jobs, abortion policies and access, inflation increasing the costs of things my family needs, mental health, K-12 schools preparing students for success after graduation, state and local taxes, crime and public safety, and other.





- *"The education system needs improvement. Indoctrination is not education."*
- *"We used to have a wonderful school system that started to fail. We can do better!"*
- *"Freeze and find a way to eliminate property taxes. When I have worked my entire life to own a property, I should not be penalized every year for achieving that dream."*
- *"Get rid of minimum markup."*
- *"State taxes should be reduced significantly."*
- *"Eliminate property taxes and state income tax."*
- *"Make cheaper to build houses."*
- *"Road construction projects would move quicker and more efficiently."*

**PROMPT 5:** What are your top three ideas or policy ideas for improving Wisconsin?



- *"Publicize and encourage school choice. Approve Constitutional Firearms Carry and abolish gun-free zones. Have Wisconsin collect Federal taxes and place them in escrow pending determination that Federal Programs are Constitutional, while declaring that those who pay Federal taxes into that escrowed account may not be prosecuted."*
- *"Affordable housing, lower taxes, and better mental health providers."*
- *"Cut government spending. We need to improve colleges who teach teachers to a higher standard for reading, writing, science, math, civics (Classical Charter School in Appleton is a good example of high academic standard). We need to cut taxes."*
- *"Let every WI citizen buy into BadgerCare. Legalize marijuana - huge tax influx. Make health alliance with neighboring states to ensure vaccine and scientific expert advice is followed regarding health care."*
- *"Allow property owners their rights to manage their property."*
- *"Embrace the arts and public radio, more bipartisan politics, property tax relief."*
- *"Lower taxes so that retired people don't leave the state, better access to health care in northern Wisconsin, and for humor: forced retirement of 1960's Hippie college professors."*
- *"Freeze property taxes, eliminate property taxes, eliminate income taxes."*
- *"Tax cuts to be continued, hold health care accountable for costs, marketing for travel destinations."*

## EXHIBIT B: POLLING

*Wisconsin Speaks* polling was conducted with RMG Research from October 23-28 of 800 registered voters with a Margin +/- 3.5%.

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Governor Evers approval drops below 50% for first time since 2024 (+2 net)
- Voters' top concerns: cost of living, economy, health care
- 74% say incomes not keeping pace with inflation
- Voters favor market-based solutions over federal control in health care

### ISSUES DRIVING THE VOTE

"How important are each of the following issues?"

ISSUE	OVERALL	GOP	IND	DEM
Inflation / Cost of Living	83	78	90	86
Economy	80	78	86	79
Health Care	77	65	89	84
Crime	64	75	67	51
Taxes & Revenue	64	68	67	58
Housing Affordability	61	49	75	71
Education	56	46	62	65
Immigration	47	63	43	29
Abortion	41	34	28	53
Child care	40	27	59	50

The statewide polling of 800 registered voters provides a clear picture of the issues shaping Wisconsin's political and policy landscape heading into 2026. The results show widespread economic anxiety, deep concern over affordability, and strong support for practical solutions on housing, health care, and K-12 education.

### Economic Pressure Dominates

Voters overwhelmingly identify the cost of living as the defining issue in the state.

- 83% say inflation and cost of living are very important to their vote.
- 39% select it as the single most important issue, far outpacing all others.
- 74% say their income is falling behind inflation, and 92% report higher food prices.

When asked what would help most with their personal finances, voters prioritize day-to-day affordability:

- Lower food costs (50%), followed by lower taxes (18%) and lower housing costs (17%).

## **Housing Is a Growing Concern**

Wisconsinites see housing as increasingly out of reach:

- 67% say it is a bad time for a first-time homebuyer.
- Among non-homeowners, nearly half say they are unlikely to ever buy a home.

There is strong support for a range of policy responses, especially those aimed at affordability and increasing supply:

- 77% favor expanding tax rebates for first-time buyers.
- 68% favor imposing rent controls.
- 65% favor reducing taxes and regulations on builders.
- A majority also support zoning reform and using future property tax revenue to fund new development.

## **Health Care: Quality Good, Transparency Needed**

Most voters rate their own health care positively—78% call it excellent or good—and 87% say accessing care locally is easy.

Voters strongly support reforms focused on transparency and choice:

- 83% say requiring providers to disclose costs would improve the system.
- 81% say giving individuals more control over their health decisions would help.

Proposals that expand federal control are viewed skeptically, with most saying they would worsen care and increase costs.

## **Education: Strong Support for Basics and Discipline**

Wisconsin voters give their local public schools mixed marks but rally behind practical improvements.

Top-rated reforms include:

- Focusing on basics like reading and writing (91% say it would help)
- Improving classroom discipline (79%)
- Reducing class sizes (79%)
- Requiring English proficiency (78%)
- Banning cell phones in class (78%)

Support for school choice and increased school funding is more divided but still net positive.



## **Child Care: Cost Is the Central Problem**

The child care issue is overwhelmingly defined by affordability:

- 65% cite the high cost of child care as the biggest challenge.  
No other factor reaches even 10%.

## **Political Climate**

Voters remain polarized but not necessarily shifting:

- A majority (57%) view the recent Charlie Kirk assassination as part of an ongoing pattern of political violence rather than a turning point.
- Voters are split on whether one party is more responsible for political violence, though those who pick a side are more likely to blame Democrats.

## **Leadership Ratings**

Statewide political figures receive mixed marks, with most leaders slightly underwater:

- Gov. Evers: +2 net approval
- Sen. Baldwin: -4
- Sen. Johnson: -9
- President Trump: -11
- Legislative Republicans and Democrats both sit at -7

Ultimately, Wisconsin voters are united by economic anxiety and a desire for practical fixes to everyday challenges. Policymakers who speak to these concerns—and provide tangible solutions—will be best positioned heading into 2026.

## EXHIBIT C: NOTES/LIST OF LISTENING SESSIONS

### Wausau/Central Wisconsin Listening Session

- **Organizer:** Greater Wausau Chamber of Commerce
- **Focus:** Economic development, workforce retention, and housing
- **Date:** May 13, 2025

During this session, local leaders and business owners discussed the key challenges facing the Wausau/central Wisconsin area. A central theme was the **difficulty in attracting and retaining talent**, with participants noting the ongoing “brain drain” of young professionals leaving the region. Small business owners emphasized the need for **leadership pipelines** and **affordable starter homes** to support workforce growth.

Other critical issues included:

- **Workforce:** Teacher shortages, driven in part by low pay, were highlighted as a pressing concern.
- **Child care:** Limited availability and a lack of qualified providers were identified as major barriers for families and workforce participation.

**Policy Proposals:** Participants suggested that Wisconsin could improve tourism promotion, taking cues from neighboring Michigan’s approach through programs like Visit Michigan.

**Key Takeaway:** Wausau leaders expressed a desire to grow but feel constrained by **housing shortages, workforce challenges, and limited child care options**. They advocated for strategic, local-driven solutions with targeted state support, emphasizing **youth engagement, apprenticeships, and place-based development** as key drivers for retaining and attracting talent.



## Virtual Listening Session with Parents

- **Organizer:** Laura Ackmann
- **Focus:** Education and student behavior
- **Date:** May 14, 2025

Participants from Kenosha, Racine and Winnebago counties voiced deep concern about inequities in education funding and declining student behavior. Parents described burned out teachers and classroom disruption as growing barriers to learning. Housing affordability and neighborhood stability were also recurring themes. Residents advocated for transparent school accountability systems and stronger family-school partnerships.

*“There’s a big divide between those who bought before rates spiked and those who can’t even try.”*

Parents from Kenosha and Racine counties described a widening gap between what families need to thrive and what they can afford. Housing costs, inflation, and stagnant wages are eroding financial stability across generations — from retirees on fixed incomes to young parents unable to buy homes. Education was the dominant topic: parents expressed frustration over declining literacy and math proficiency, funding inequities tied to outdated state formulas, and a breakdown of discipline and accountability in schools.

This group was pragmatic and solutions-oriented — focused on reforming, not abandoning, public education. Participants urged policymakers to balance fiscal responsibility with measurable outcomes and restore the authority of teachers and parents within classrooms.

## Oshkosh Listening Session

- **Organizer:** Group of conservative-leaning voters, Oshkosh
- **Focus:** Public safety, community fragmentation, and political polarization
- **Date:** May 20, 2025

The Oshkosh session highlighted issues of public safety, community fragmentation, and political polarization. Participants sought to “depoliticize” local governance and focus on shared goals like safe schools and thriving small businesses. Education reform, again, surfaced as central—especially literacy and civics.

**Key takeaway:** Residents crave depolarization and practical solutions to restore trust across community divides.

Participants in the Oshkosh listening session expressed growing concern over public safety, declining education quality, and the rising cost of living. The conversation emphasized **competence, accountability, and affordability** as top public priorities.

The central theme — *“Public Safety, Education, and Cost of Living”* — captured the community’s frustration with crime, academic decline, and economic pressure on working families. While participants voiced strong opinions on policy, the tone was pragmatic and solutions-oriented, underscoring a desire for **fiscally responsible, common-sense governance that serves all Wisconsinites**.

## Northern/Northeast WI Listening Session

- **Organizer:** IRG's Alesha Guenther
- **Focus:** Wisconsin's affordability and future
- **Date:** July 24, 2025

This virtual listening session brought together retired conservative Christian women from Northern and Northeastern Wisconsin, reflecting a deeply values-driven perspective rooted in faith, fairness, and civic responsibility. Participants described feeling financially overburdened, culturally dismissed, and increasingly anxious about Wisconsin's affordability and future.

The dominant theme — *"We've worked our whole lives, and still pay the price"* — captured the group's frustration with rising taxes, failing health care access, and what they perceived as a decline in moral and political integrity. Participants linked personal experiences of economic strain and bureaucratic frustration to a broader sense of moral decline and alienation from government institutions.

Despite the frustration, participants expressed strong civic engagement, faith-based community organizing, and a shared desire to restore what they described as *"truth, fairness, and freedom"* in Wisconsin governance.

Across multiple issues — from taxation and health care to media bias — participants emphasized a sense of moral and economic injustice.

*"We've paid, we've worked our whole lives, and we keep paying. Now even health care keeps going up — and we can't even get in to see a doctor."*

*"We love this country and we love the people of this state. We should not be minimized or labeled as crazy people."*

Their reflections centered on three intertwined frustrations: Economic punishment of retirees and working families through taxation, inaccessibility of quality health care in rural Wisconsin, and diminished respect for faith-based and conservative voices in public life.

Participants described Wisconsin's tax system as punitive toward retirees and working-class families, citing high property taxes and taxation of Social Security income as drivers of outmigration to states like Florida and Tennessee.

*"We have friends who moved to Florida — six months and a day — to get the tax advantages. Wisconsin's losing income and retirees."*

*"If Wisconsin wants to be prosperous, we need to keep retirees' income here."*

Health care access — particularly in rural northern regions — was cited as broken and deteriorating. Participants reported long wait times, specialist shortages, and narrowing provider networks.

*"I was supposed to have a four-week appointment — it turned into three months."*



*"My husband waited a year for a skin check. It's broken."*

Frustration was directed toward insurance complexity and federal reforms that reduced provider choice.

*"Obamacare was supposed to make it affordable — instead, you can't even choose your doctor."*

Participants expressed compassion for younger generations unable to purchase homes due to high costs, inflation, and limited inventory.

*"My heart breaks for young people. They can't find anything under \$1,200 a month."*

*"All they're building is apartments — they don't want people to own homes anymore."*

Homeownership was framed as a moral and civic foundation — fostering independence and community stability.

*"Homeownership brings independence — that's why the left doesn't want it."*

### Milwaukee Listening Session

- **Organizer:** Jacarrie Carr from Kicks For Kids
- **Focus:** Parents Opinions
- **Date:** June 24, 2025

The Milwaukee North Side session centered on a shared conviction: **"It takes all of us."** Parents voiced a deep commitment to their children's success, emphasizing that schools, families, churches, and communities must work together to raise disciplined, capable, and confident young people.

While participants celebrated faith-based education and community mentorship, they expressed frustration with systems that are **academically inconsistent, economically unsustainable, and emotionally unresponsive**. The group called for a holistic approach to education — one that values life skills, emotional health, and family accountability as much as academics.



## Green Bay Area Listening Session

- **Organizer:** AmeriLux
- **Focus:** Housing, cost-of-living, and health care
- **Date:** June 20, 2025

**Summary:** IRG's Courtney Gustafson sat down with a group of AmeriLux workers to hear about the challenges they face in their community and what policies they see as helping or hurting Wisconsin. One of the topics that dominated the conversation was affordable housing, notably because the group of staffers who participated in this session were in their twenties and thirties, on average. Workers at AmeriLux described a pervasive **cost-of-living squeeze**, citing stagnant wages, rising housing costs, health care expenses, and child care barriers as central obstacles to financial stability.

The group demonstrated **pragmatic problem-solving**: participants suggested targeted policy reforms, including affordable housing programs, tax relief, health care cost transparency, and investments in K-12 and vocational education. Marijuana legalization was also highlighted as a potential revenue source for schools and child care programs.

**Key takeaway:** Young workers feel squeezed; they support reforms that reward effort and responsibility.

*"I'm probably another five years away from buying a house — unless I want to make a bad decision."*



Photo Credit: [AmeriLux Website](#)

## Fond du Lac Listening Session

- **Organizer:** Recipes for Freedom
- **Focus:** Erosion of Society
- **Date:** June 21, 2025

**Summary:** IRG's Courtney Gustafson sat down with a group of people in Fond du Lac concerned about the direction of the state and their county in June.

The Fond du Lac listening session reflected deep **institutional distrust** across multiple systems — elections, education, health care, and media. Participants described feeling disenfranchised by state and federal leadership, unrepresented by institutions, and burdened by excessive taxation without accountability.

At the heart of the discussion was a collective call for **grassroots reclamation of power** through civic education, constitutional literacy, and moral renewal. Participants expressed that Wisconsin's future depends on rebuilding trust, restoring integrity in elections, and returning decision-making authority to local communities and parents.

*"Until we fix our elections, nothing will change."*

*"We've been taught to trust politicians, doctors, and the media — and it's all a big lie."*

*"We the people have the authority — but we've let them take it away from us."*

Education dominated the session. Participants criticized constant curriculum changes, reliance on Chromebooks, and loss of civics and traditional learning. They expressed frustration with poor academic results and perceived ideological bias in schools.

*"Facts don't change. Buy one good curriculum and stick with it."*

High taxes were linked to institutional waste and declining results. Participants criticized the mismatch between spending and outcomes in education, infrastructure, and welfare programs.

**Some of the policy ideas suggested by the group in terms of taxation and government spending include:** eliminate state income tax (Florida/Texas model), exempt overtime pay from taxation, tie property taxes to school performance metrics, drug-testing for welfare recipients, and limit local referendums and administrative overhead.

*"Sixty percent of my property tax goes to schools I don't even use."*



## Beloit Area Listening Session

- **Organizer:** Beloit Area Chamber of Commerce
- **Focus:** Workforce - casino coming to the area and housing - people are not building there.
- **Date:** June 25, 2025

Residents described Beloit as a city with strong investment potential, including new development and the upcoming Ho-Chunk Casino, but emphasized that **basic infrastructure, housing, child care, and schools are not keeping pace**. Participants stressed a desire for **practical, locally driven solutions** supported by state partnerships and regulatory reform.

Beloit residents highlighted the urgent need for **foundational support in housing, child care, schools, and municipal infrastructure**, alongside initiatives to strengthen workforce stability and community trust. They emphasized **practical, locally led action supported by strategic state policies** as the path forward.





## Brillion Listening Session

- **Organizer:** AriensCo
- **Focus:** Manufacturing, recruitment and retention of employees
- **Date:** July 15, 2025

**Summary:** IRG’s Courtney Gustafson and Nelson Ritthaler sat down with some folks at the AriensCo in Brillion in July.

Brillion, located in east-central Wisconsin, represents the state’s manufacturing backbone — home to legacy industrial employers and family-owned operations that sustain rural economies. The community embodies Wisconsin’s reputation for productivity and craftsmanship but faces mounting pressure from demographic decline, rising costs, and structural barriers in housing, child care, and health care. The Brillion session captured the voice of pragmatic business leaders confronting these realities firsthand, offering a blueprint for economic competitiveness rooted in workforce, family, and fiscal reform.

Manufacturing leaders in Brillion described Wisconsin as a **great place to build, but an increasingly expensive place to stay competitive**. Despite strong work ethic, loyal employees, and high job quality, **hidden costs — especially health care, child care, and housing shortages — are eroding Wisconsin’s workforce advantage**.



Participants repeatedly contrasted Wisconsin with **Tennessee**, which they viewed as a model for affordability and pro-growth policy: **free trade schools, zero income tax, and fast-track permitting**. The result, they said, is that Tennessee “finds welders all day long — certified, debt-free, ready to work,” while Wisconsin employers are “raising wages and still can’t find people.”

## Walworth County Area Listening Session

- **Organizer:** Adams
- **Focus:** Erosion of Society
- **Date:** August 13, 2025

**Summary:** IRG sat down with a group of employees at Adams in August. Adams is located in Elkhorn, which is in Walworth County near Wisconsin's southern border. Participants in this session represented a mix of manufacturing, trades, and local business workers — pragmatic and civic-minded residents committed to restoring accountability, self-reliance, and community integrity.

This listening session brought together manufacturing and trade workers deeply rooted in Wisconsin's small-town traditions of **hard work, faith, and accountability**. Participants expressed frustration with what they see as a growing **loss of common sense and moral grounding** across institutions — from schools and government to the broader culture.



While proud of Wisconsin's work ethic and local safety, attendees voiced concern that **taxes are high, discipline is low, and transparency is missing**. They described a need for reforms that restore fiscal responsibility, educational focus, and civic integrity — grounded in family values and community leadership.

*"Everything's got to start at the dinner table. You've got to raise leaders again."*

*"It didn't get this way in a day — it's taken years of bad decisions and no accountability."*

Participants balanced pragmatic policy ideas — like tax reform and apprenticeship expansion — with deeper moral and cultural reflections on the future of Wisconsin's small towns.

Residents voiced strong frustration with Wisconsin's tax burden, citing a disconnect between high costs and poor service delivery. These participants described government spending as bloated and inefficient, demanding greater transparency and measurable outcomes.

*"We're certainly not known for having low taxes — and it's not clear what we're getting for them."*

*"You can't spend more than you take in — basic financial common sense."*

*"Everybody pays 10%. If you make a dollar, you pay a dime. If you make a million, you pay \$100,000. Fair and simple."*

## Burlington Listening Session

- **Organizer:** Experience Burlington
- **Focus:** The wellbeing and education of children
- **Date:** August 28, 2025

The Burlington session underscored an urgent warning: *“We’re squeezing the middle — and starving the future.”* Participants described Wisconsin as struggling under the combined weight of rising costs, stagnant wages, and restrictive fiscal policies. Families are increasingly unable to afford homes or child care, while local governments and schools operate under funding caps that prevent adaptation to inflation and population growth.

Despite these challenges, the session revealed deep community alignment around pragmatic, bipartisan solutions — particularly in areas like child care, education funding, and workforce incentives. Burlington stakeholders emphasized one resounding message: *Wisconsin’s future depends on reinvesting in its children, families, and workforce.*

Across sectors, participants described a widening gap between what Wisconsin families earn and what it costs to live.

*“Inflation’s gone up on houses, but salaries haven’t. A home’s doubled in price — teacher pay’s barely changed.”*

*“We’re intentionally sabotaging public education — starving it and then blaming it for failing.”*

*“We’re treading water — \$60,000 in new revenue for a city doesn’t even cover insurance increases.”*

The conversation repeatedly circled back to a central question: If Wisconsin won’t invest in children, families, and housing — what future is it building?

Every participant identified housing as a critical barrier to family stability and workforce retention. Starter homes now exceed \$300,000, while local wages have stagnated.

*“A house that sold for \$165,000 not long ago now goes for \$314,000 — no yard, and five offers in 24 hours.”*

Child care emerged as Burlington’s most acute crisis. Waitlists exceed two years, centers operate at a loss, and regulatory constraints deter employer-run options.

*“We called three months before trying to have kids — no daycare could guarantee a spot.”*

*“It’s impossible to make money on child care — good regulations, but no way to sustain the model.”*

Educators described a funding system that has failed to keep pace with inflation. Districts face rising costs and zero-percent state increases, forcing referendums for essential operations.



*"It's like an intentional sabotage of public education — starve schools, then say they failed."*

*"Ten years ago, a teacher's salary bought a home — now it barely pays rent."*

HR leaders called the "benefits cliff" the most solvable bipartisan issue in the state. Even modest wage gains often trigger major losses in child care or food assistance, trapping families in low-income cycles.

*"If they earn one dollar more, they lose thousands — it's wild."*

*"We're forcing generational poverty — people want to move up, but the system punishes them."*





## Hayward Listening Session

- **Organizer:** Bill Johnson/Johnson Tumber
- **Focus:** Northern Wisconsin issues and priorities
- **Date:** September 10, 2025

**Summary:** IRG's Courtney Gustafson and Nelson Ritthaler sat down with a group of workers at Johnson Timber in Hayward, Wisconsin in September.

IRG's Hayward Listening Session brought together residents from forestry, small business, and family backgrounds across the Sawyer County region. Participants expressed deep frustration over rising costs, stagnant wages, limited services, and perceived erosion of community standards.

Key takeaways reveal a population under financial and social pressure — **working harder yet falling further behind**. Common threads included unaffordable health care, workforce shortages, housing displacement, deteriorating infrastructure, and the loss of traditional work ethic and family stability.

Participants described a growing disconnect between **state-level decision-making and rural lived experience**, calling for policies that “restore common sense, reward work, and protect the Northwoods.”

Despite frustrations, participants emphasized enduring community assets: natural beauty and outdoor recreation opportunities, strong sense of place, family roots, and faith traditions, and close-knit community and Midwestern hospitality.

*“It’s quiet, relaxing, not busy — and it’s home.”*

The Hayward listening session underscored a consistent message: rural Wisconsinites are **resilient but strained**. Communities feel overburdened by costs, underrepresented in policy, and disconnected from decision-making processes centered in Madison. Participants called for a reorientation of policy around **local control, practical outcomes, and respect for hard work and family values** — in short, a plea to “*restore common sense and reward work*” across the Northwoods.



## SE WI Listening Session

- **Organizer:** Republican Women of SE Wisconsin
- **Focus:** Governmental Accountability
- **Date:** September 17, 2025

**Summary:** IRG's Courtney Gustafson spoke with a group of citizens in Southeast Wisconsin in September. Participants in the Racine–Kenosha session expressed growing anxiety about Wisconsin's affordability, educational decline, and loss of public accountability. The central theme seemed to be — working families are stuck: costs up, quality down — captured widespread frustration that while families work harder, their quality of life continues to erode.

The discussion was urgent yet pragmatic. Participants did not seek larger government programs but **competent, accountable institutions** focused on delivering results in education, housing, and health care. Concerns centered on **rising costs, workforce shortages, and declining standards in our K-12 school system**, with calls for renewed local control and performance-based oversight.

## De Pere Listening Session

- **Organizer:** Northeast Wisconsin Patriots Group
- **Focus:** Skepticism of government
- **Date:** September 18, 2025

**Summary:** IRG's Courtney Gustafson sat down with a group of citizens in Northeast Wisconsin in September. Participants in this listening session voiced a deep skepticism toward government institutions and centralized power, emphasizing personal responsibility, local control, and the protection of faith and family as Wisconsin's cultural foundation. The dominant sentiment—*"Government's too big and too far removed"*—reflects frustration with taxation, regulation, and perceived moral decline.

Attendees identified five primary areas of concern: health care affordability and freedom, family breakdown and welfare disincentives, declining education standards, election integrity, and excessive taxation. These were framed within a broader desire for state-level reform, smaller government, and renewed trust in civic institutions.

These participants were involved conservative grassroots organizers from the NEW Patriots network. At the heart of the discussion was a call to **restore trust in government, reward work and marriage, and return power to local communities and citizens**. Health care costs, school transparency, and election integrity emerged as top priorities. The tone was pragmatic yet urgent, emphasizing that "government's too big — and too far removed."

*"The federal government should have zero influence in health care. The Constitution says so."*

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